



## Walt's Dream for PLC is Alive and Well

By Del Hager

The late Walt Odegaard, founder of the Prairie Learning Center in St. Gertrude, ND, had a very unique vision to care for boys who needed a transitional environment or an alternative to incarceration. Walt died in 2006 but he couldn't have picked a better person to carry on his dream and lead the program than Dave Marion. Like Odegaard, Marion is an alumni and former football player at North Dakota State University. It doesn't take but a few minutes to realize that Dave shares every ounce of the passion and commitment of his predecessor and mentor.



Dave Marion, Monica Miller, Tara Mindt and Holly Steckler

PLC opened in 1991 and Marion started working there in 1993. As a Residential Care Facility, they have grown from having only six beds available to today's count of fifty beds that are 94-97% occupied on an annual basis. They are a private, non-profit state funded facility with the bulk of the referrals coming from the Division of Juvenile Services and County

Social Services in North Dakota. Fostering Communications interviewed Walt Odegaard in the spring of 1997 for a newsletter article and he commented that PLC was "the best kept secret in North Dakota." Ironically, Dave Marion made the same observation during an interview this past month.

Situated on a lonely stretch of state Highway 31, about 65 miles southwest of Mandan among the rolling hills of Grant County, Prairie Learning Center offers a distinct contrast to other residential facilities in the state. A boy between the ages of 12 and 18 will not see any girls among the residents when he arrives. He won't see any street lights, shopping centers, or even a grocery store. But, as Marion explains, "he'll be met at the door with a hand shake and a smile." Marion went on to say, "when he first arrives, we want to establish what our commitment is to this young man, what our expectations are and we try to get a good feel for where he's at as well. We know on paper what they look like but that can be very deceiving. The worst kids in the world on paper, have turned around and become the best kids, committed to making a change here."

The first two weeks of placement are for Orientation. The treatment plan is developed as they begin to establish goals and objectives while evaluating and assessing issues such as drugs, alcohol, anger management, independent life skills and educational needs. Marion describes the treatment program as behavior modification or Reality Control Therapy. Points are earned on a daily basis (21 points)

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and accumulated weekly (147 total) as the young man progresses through the three levels of the program. The average stay at PLC is about six months.

When Walt Odegaard started the program, he brought with him an understanding of what young people need. His background of working in corrections in North Dakota and in a boot camp/outward bound type program in Minnesota, helped him realize the importance of an outdoor, rural environment where kids "would be able to clear their heads a little bit and start to turn those corners in their life", Marion explained.



**Dave Marion,**  
PLC Administrative Director

The distractions presented in towns and cities and local schools simply do not exist at PLC. The kids have an opportunity to start fresh and interact with staff who really care about them.

Marion describes his staff as "some of the greatest people in the world. They're good parents and they bring those strengths to the table and these kids feel good about that. Even saying 'good morning' is more of a positive interaction than many of them have ever had." However, he said, "We don't sugar coat it. We're pretty strict, pretty hardnosed, and very straight forward. These kids have done something to get here. They're not bad kids but they've done some bad things. They've made some mistakes and we're giving them an opportunity to go back and be productive in the community." Most of them have come through the correctional system and can be pretty tough kids. They typically have extensive mental health needs that require them to make frequent trips to Bismarck for appointments because there is no on-site psychologist or psychiatrist.

On the education side of the program, PLC has an on-site school that is not accredited with the Department of Public Instruction because of some elective courses they are unable to offer, but they do offer a wide range of courses designed to get every youth caught up and on track for graduation by the time they return to their home school district. All of their teachers are certified for Junior and Senior High School in the core basics and electives such as vocational agriculture, carpentry and small engine

repair. Four para-professionals also work in the classroom. Many of the boys are in special education and have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The small class size of 6-8 students allows considerable one on one attention. The PLC staff work very closely with the home school on each student's specific educational plan. They are also licensed as a GED testing site.

The Center employs two certified Equine Therapy trainers. They have seven horses in the program where the boys are taught teamwork, appropriate boundaries, social skills and anger management. Marion said, "this is not for every kid but some who have not responded in other areas often do very well in this program."

Community service is another area where the boys excel. As expected, when the Center opened there was skepticism on the part of many local residents about having a facility for troubled youth in their "back yard". PLC staff and youth volunteer many hours to work with several elderly organizations, AM VETS, Lions Club as well as local farmers and ranchers. Lawn mowing, leaf raking and yard clean-up are routine projects in the communities of Flasher and Carson. When severe storms and flooding occurred in the region, the PLC youth and staff were very instrumental in the clean-up effort. As a result, community relations have been excellent. Marion stated, "The people and organizations have been very good to us and we're very good to them."

It's hard to believe that PLC is a secret to North Dakota social service agencies any longer. Their growth over the past 16 years has been remarkable while the vision of Walt Odegaard has not only been kept alive by Dave Marion and his staff, but the vision is growing and becoming a richer part of the North Dakota child welfare system.



**Thomasine Heitkamp,**  
Chair of the UND  
Department of Social Work  
provides the Keynote  
Addresses at the  
opening ceremony.

# Scholarship

By Vicki Hoff

The recipient of the \$600 North Dakota Foster Parent Association Scholarship and the \$500 Ruth Meiers Scholarship is Christy Ann Garreau, the foster daughter of Ted and Sandy Wiebe of Beulah. Christy has lived with Ted and Sandy since she was 13 years old. Sandy describes Christy as a very nice young lady and very friendly. She has participated in basketball, volleyball, softball and Future Farmers of America. Christy wants to go to college to better herself and have a secure job. She wants her family to be proud of her and is going to work hard to accomplish her dream. Christy is going to United Tribes Technical College (Sitting Bull College) and majoring in Criminal Justice.

We wish you well Christy!

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## Foster Parents are Mandated Reporters of Suspected Child Abuse and Neglect

By Del Hager

As of August 1, 2007, foster parents were added to the list of persons required to report what they suspect to be child abuse or neglect. The North Dakota



**Kathy Mayer, Director,  
Prevent Child Abuse ND,  
informed foster parents of their  
mandated responsibility to  
report suspected child abuse  
and neglect at the NDFPA  
Conference.**

Century Code Chapter 50-25.1, often referred to as the "reporting law" defines all of the provisions in the law including the method of reporting, immunity from liability, confidentiality of records, penalty for failure to report and many other important aspects of child protection services. If you would like a copy of the law, you can download it from a website or you can

contact your county social service office. The website address is: [www.legis.nd.gov/cencode/t50c251.pdf](http://www.legis.nd.gov/cencode/t50c251.pdf).

Reports of what you suspect to be child abuse and/or neglect should be made to county social services. If you have concerns about a family or if you are really unsure of the facts about a situation and are unsure of what to do, you should call the county office and speak to a social worker who works in Child Protective Services. If the information you provide meets the standard for reporting, the social worker

may ask you to complete a written report. The agency will then be responsible for conducting a family assessment in order to determine if "Services Are Required" for the safety of the child(ren). If you fail to report what you suspect to be child abuse and/or neglect and it's later determined that you willfully withheld that information, you could be charged with a Class B Misdemeanor.

By law, the identity of a person making a report or supplying information under this chapter, is protected. That means, the social worker is not allowed to disclose your identity. Agencies take this responsibility very seriously and if the "subject" of the report (the person alleged to have abused or neglected the child) were to request a copy of the social worker's final report, or if the case were to go to court, any information that would give the subject your identity, would be stricken from the report.

After the social worker completes the assessment and a Child Protection Team reviews the facts and determines if services are required to protect the child, you will be notified of the actions taken by the agency.

Once again, if you have any questions about your responsibility or concerns about a child or family, please contact your local County Social Service agency.





## Awards

By Colette Sorenson

### Agency Of The Year –

*Williams County Social Services*

In nominating Williams County, David and Colette Sorenson stated: “As Foster Parents, Williams County Social Services has consistently offered us unfailing support on all issues related to the Foster Parent program. The staff has always been courteous, available for our needs and very supportive. They also do a wonderful job as advocates for the children in Foster Care. We believe that this agency should be recognized for their dedication.”

### Social Worker Of The Year –

*Natalie Anderson,*

*Burleigh County Social Services*

The nominating statement from Jon and Carol Mielke, foster parents, and the letter of support from Darlene Hill, Burleigh/Morton County Social Work Supervisor, describe Natalie as intelligent, insightful, hardworking and an excellent social worker. “She came to Burleigh County with many years of experience in both South Dakota and Wisconsin and has brought a fresh perspective to the office”, writes Darlene Hill. “She has shared her knowledge with her co-workers and is a great team player who also works well with parents, children and foster families.” The Mielke’s shared a personal story: “We have had the good fortune of working with Natalie on at least two occasions since she came home to North Dakota. One of these cases was extremely complex and spanned the course of well over a year. We all did the best that we could for the children involved and she still goes out of her way to keep us apprised when she hears news about the little children who were members of our family for nearly three years. She would not have to do that, but she does. Because she cares. We only wish that we could put into words the respect and admiration and gratitude that we feel for Natalie. She is a delight to work with and we always take great joy in knowing that “her kids” will receive exactly what they deserve – nothing but the best.”

### Foster Parent of the Year –

*Naomi Harner, Kindred*

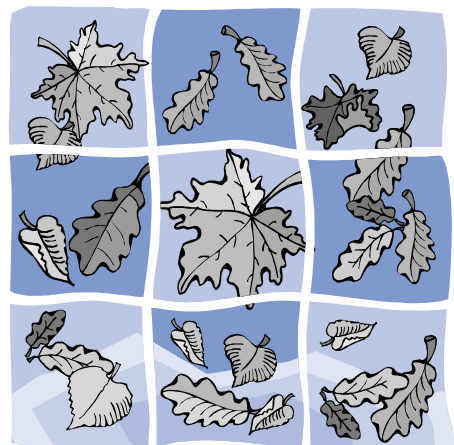
Naomi was nominated for this top award by fellow PATH foster parent, Mary Krueger of Walcott, ND, who writes:

“I have known Naomi Harner for the past six years and have watched her family grow from two to seven children. She is a loving and caring individual. Her children adore her as does anyone who is lucky enough to be friends or acquaintances of her and her family. She has set forth a loving nurturing environment for each one of her children and tends to their needs with humor, love and devotion. She is a marvelous mother, a marvelous friend and confidant.



Naomi Harner receives the Foster Parent of the Year Award from NDFPA President James Schnabel and Awards Chair Colette Sorenson.

Naomi works non-stop for PATH by reaching out to the community, sharing and helping to support not only her own family but other foster parents in need of help or guidance. Naomi really cares about everyone in our unit. She goes out of her way recruiting other foster parents. She has been an active member of training for our unit. Her oldest daughter has been on foster parent panels along with her husband, Bruce. They work well as a team. I know that if she was not in my life and the life of my foster children we would all feel the loss very deeply.”



# North Dakota Chafee Foster Care Independence Program

By Dawnita Nilles

You are beginning to hear and see this title everywhere, but many of you are asking: what exactly is the North Dakota Chafee Foster Care Independence Program? The long answer involves a fairly extensive PowerPoint with facts, figures and many stories. So I'll try to sum it up here in just a few paragraphs (if you would like to see the PowerPoint and hear the stories that can be arranged by contacting me or any of the IL coordinators).

First of all, allow me to tell you what Independent Living is NOT. It is not a class that a foster care youth completes. Instead, it is an ongoing process that results with youth having the resources and skills to live successfully as an adult. "Independent" of the various systems they may otherwise have become a part of.

In a nutshell, the IL program helps individual youth with their individual needs. This is done in a variety of ways, some of which include the foster parents. Future newsletter pieces will include information that will help you help the teens in your home reach their independent living goals.

You may have heard that the IL program is

reserved for the youth who are identified as 'aging out' and that is true. We wish we could assist every youth over 16 in foster care. However, limits of time, funds and resources prevent that from happening. At this time, first priority for current foster youth, is given to youth over the age of 16 who are identified as likely to age out of foster care (that simply means they are likely to turn 18 while in care).

When a youth turns 18, and is released from foster care, they can't come back to foster care for assistance; however, one of the great components of the IL program is they can come back to it. Up until they turn 21, they can request assistance through the IL program.

The next several newsletters that will be coming out will have a little corner on the IL program. We'll try to touch on all the various components to give you a better idea of what happens when a youth in your home is invited to participate in the IL program.

If you have immediate questions, please contact your County Social Services office and they will be able to direct you to your Regional IL Coordinator.



Dawnita Nilles,  
Region IV ILP Coordinator  
presents at 2007 NDFPA Conference



(above) Some of the 300+ participants at the 2007 NDFPA Conference, hear from Dr. Rick Delaney.

(right) Dr. Rick Delaney, keynote presenter at 2007 NDFPA Conference



(above) Ukrainian Dancers perform at Conference banquet.

(right) Deb DeWitz, Social Work Professor at Minot State University, entertains and informs foster parents at the Saturday banquet with her self-care presentation called "A Round Tuit."



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